

# Lead poisoning imperils thousands of Detroit's children

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Studies show that tens of thousands of children in Detroit are suffering the effects of lead poisoning due to industrial pollution and old and deteriorated housing. The crisis has been compounded by the failure of business as well as state and federal authorities to mount any serious cleanup.

In 2001 nearly 17,000 young Detroit children tested had elevated levels of lead in their blood, according to a recent series of articles on lead poisoning in the *Detroit Free Press*. The actual number of children with high blood-lead levels is much higher, as only a fraction of Detroit's children are ever tested.

Lead enters a child's bloodstream after being ingested either from paint chips, lead in the soil or most likely lead dust from disintegrating paint. Once in a child's bloodstream the lead travels to the brain, soft tissue and bones. Children who have poor diets and lack sufficient calcium and iron are hurt the most. The poisoning can begin even before a child is born. When an adult woman gets pregnant any lead stored in her bones as a child leaches out to poison her fetus.

The US housing department (HUD) says of lead: "[It] can reduce IQ, cause learning disabilities and impair hearing. Children who have elevated blood lead levels often experience reduced attention spans, hyperactivity and can exhibit behavior problems. At higher exposures, lead can damage a child's kidneys and central nervous system and cause anemia, coma, convulsions and even death."

One in ten young children in Detroit have lead levels in their bodies high enough to cause irreparable health problems. The percentage is likely greater than currently acknowledged. Reliable experts in the scientific community maintain that no amount of lead is safe and even 5 micrograms per deciliter ( $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$ ) is enough to damage a child for life.

George W. Bush is currently stacking a US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) advisory committee with panelists sympathetic to the lead industry to get a new standard this year, hoping for an acceptable blood-lead level to be set higher than the current official upper limit of  $10 \mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$ .

The State of Michigan has been sued because only a small percentage of children on Medicaid are tested when they are young. The *Detroit Free Press* reported that last year Bush tried to have the requirement simply dropped from federal regulations. The paper also noted the attempt by former Michigan Governor John Engler to return \$5 million in lead abatement grants in 1995 to the federal government on the grounds that it would require setting up "a costly licensing and regulation program" for companies that remove lead paint. An Engler spokesman claimed that Michigan had more pressing problems than lead poisoning.

The series pointed to studies that have shown a child with a blood-lead level of just 10 will lose from two to eight IQ points. The *Detroit Free Press* did not report that several experts have attributed differences in test scores between low-income inner-city children and their counterparts in wealthier suburban neighborhoods in part to brain damage caused by lead poisoning in poor neighborhoods.

Lead was taken out of paint in the US in 1978, 50 years after European countries outlawed it. Nevertheless, US courts have rejected scores of cases attempting to hold paint companies liable for lead paint cleanup. Lead was added to US gasoline in the 1920s, phased out in the late 1970s and finally completely banned from gasoline in 1986. There was a considerable drop in the percentage of all US children poisoned in the years after lead was removed from these two major sources.

But this also caused lead poisoning to be concentrated in children in low-income families. These poorer families are often condemned to live in crumbling housing in polluted neighborhoods. The *Detroit Free Press* quoted Don Ryan, executive director of the Alliance to End Childhood Lead Poisoning, who estimated it would take \$50 billion to \$100 billion to clean up the worst of the lead poisoning in the 25 million US houses or apartments that have significant hazards. He said the federal government targets only about \$150 million a year for lead abatement.

"The good news is that the program is highly targeted to low-income, high-risk housing," he said. "The bad news is

we're addressing less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the significant lead hazards each year. That's a 1,000-year program to make the housing stock safe."

In Detroit, 56 percent of the housing stock was built before 1950. Federal lead abatement funds are not available to nearly half the families in Detroit because they are renters. A total of 1.1 million homes in Michigan need to be cleaned up. But federal, state, county and city efforts combined have abated only 1,500 homes in the state since 1994.

It is worthwhile to compare this glacial pace of lead cleanup in homes—where tens of thousands of vulnerable children live—to the ambitious completion of a new baseball field, football stadium and several casinos in Detroit in the past few years with the help of local government officials. Kwame Kilpatrick, mayor of Detroit, has followed a long line of city Democratic politicians in offering tax breaks and other favors to the biggest corporations and real estate interests in the area.

Last December Kilpatrick had poor tenants evicted from a downtown property to make way for upscale loft apartments. Lofts are being built in the city that rent for \$1,600 to \$2,000 a month. But for a working class family to find an affordable apartment, much less one that is not lead poisoned, is a nearly impossible undertaking.

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporter interviewed Angela Lockett, who came to a recent town hall meeting in Detroit organized by the mayor's task force on lead poisoning. In October her children were hospitalized because they were so severely poisoned by the lead in her rented house.

Ms. Lockett said she spoke up at the meeting because she was trying to explain that her experience was not a bit like that of the speaker who had gone before her, a young mother city officials included on the agenda as testament to the efficiency and helpfulness of the government bureaucracies.

"At that meeting I wanted to say a lot more than I did. They had that woman talk about how she had been helped and she had only one child. I have three children and I cannot get any help. I have called everywhere to try to get help to find a place to live. I called the mayor's office. I called City Hall. I called the governor's officer, she never called back. I have to have a place that is not poisoned. Children's Hospital sent out letters to try to help me find a place to take the children, but there is nothing.

"When we moved four years ago, we were in desperate need of a place because we had been burned out of our old house. After we found the children were poisoned, the health department came out and gave the owners until November 15 to fix the house up. Instead the company lied and claimed we were squatters, took us to court, and the judge threw us out of the house.

"My two younger kids were born and raised in that house,

and they were the ones the most poisoned. Leslie, the older one, had lead in his blood too, but not enough to have to go into the hospital. He suffers from seizures now.

"Also they gave the impression up there that it was up to the mothers to ask to have their children tested for lead. Every time I took my kids to the Wellness Plan I thought the physical they were getting meant they were being tested for lead. I realized my kids were not acting right for their age. Because of my job as a nursing assistant I was aware of problems like lead poisoning, but other mothers—how are they supposed to know to ask? My children were on Medicaid because my job paid so little, but I had to beg them to test my kids for lead.

"By the time the kids were tested it was so bad that Angel, who is three years old, had a lead level over 39. Dennis, the one who is two, had a level over 44. I had to quit working because the children were spending a long time in the hospital to be treated to get the lead out of their systems. It was scary to see the x-rays with big chunks of lead paint chips inside their little bodies. They were both in the hospital for about 10 days.

"Dennis had to go in a second time at the end of December because his level went back up to 52. I wanted to go to a shelter while I looked for a new place to live but Children's Hospital and Social Services said no, because none of the homeless shelters had been certified lead-safe.

"Right now I'm living at my grandmother's house, but there are 14 people living there and one of them has a baby on the way. My mother is disabled but she is sleeping on the floor so my children can have a bed.

"The Family Independence Agency says they have no responsibility to find me a place to live. I am so fed up with them. Once I had seven different workers in the space of one week. If I move my children from my grandmother's house before having a house tested for lead they said they would have my children taken away from me."



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